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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Jäger, J. (2018). A Fist on the Cover: Some Remarks on Visual Sources in Sports History. *Historical Social Research*, 43(2), 39-52. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.43.2018.2.39-52>

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A Fist on the Cover. Some Remarks on Visual Sources in Sports History

Jens Jäger*

Abstract: »Eine Faust auf dem Titel. Einige Bemerkungen zu visuellen Quellen in der Sportgeschichte«. Visual sources are extremely important for the understanding of the development of modern sports. Images in magazines, newspapers, books, collecting cards, and all the paraphernalia pertaining to sports shape the collective notion of what sports means and which values are connected with it. This article about a specific image which made a cover of the leading French sports magazine *La Vie au Grand Air* in 1908 explores the possibilities of historical analyses of media coverage in sports including images. The content of an image, its immediate and wider context including iconographic traditions and conventions and how they work together are taken into consideration. The special character of photographs in the media makes them pivotal for the contemporary promotion of sports and the specific way to imagine concepts of a modern body around 1900 and beyond as an outdoor activity and way of life.

Keywords: Visual History, sports magazines, boxing, media history, sports history, French magazines.

1. Introduction

When number 503 of *La Vie au Grand Air* (LVGA) went on sale on May 9, 1908 and was distributed to thousands of subscribers, the cover was as impressive as it was unusual: It was a photograph of a fist and wrist protruding from the lower left corner up to the top right corner of the title [Figure 1]. The fist covered about three-fifths of the page. Apart from the letters of the title “La Vie au Grand Air,” none of the text scattered over the page could be read from a distance.

Although it was common for LVGA – as it was and still is for most magazines – to have a large photographic image as an eye-catcher on the cover, the subject of No. 503 remained an exception. Only once since LVGA was founded in 1898, a single body part made it to the cover: on February 25, 1904 the shod foot of rugby player Rutherford embellished issue No. 285.

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Figure 1: Cover, LVGA (1908), No. 503, May 9



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Musée Air France

Source: <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k96036661.item>> (Accessed March 5, 2018).

A bare fist on the cover of LVGA or any contemporary magazine was unusual. To understand the decision of the editor we need to discuss the market for illustrated magazines around 1900 and the overall trend of visualisation typical for a large part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another avenue of reasoning brings us to the complex function of this specific published image.

This will highlight the opportunities for historical approaches towards sports history in using visual evidence and opens the perspective to recent debates in historiography regarding visual sources.

2. Illustrated Magazines around 1900

In 1908 illustrated magazines already had a venerable history. In media history the 1830s are marked as a period in which the illustrated magazine emerged as an important and widely read source of information, entertainment, and instruction (Barnhurst and Nerone 2000, 2001; Bösch 2011; Bucher 2016a; Weise 2012; Zimmermann and Schmebling 2006). From a more general perspective visualisation was a formative process changing society as a whole. As Jonathan Crary contends, it was in the long run creating a new form of perception (Crary 1990; Bucher 2016b). The rise of illustrated magazines was a consequence of this process and accelerated it. The decades after 1830 saw massive innovations in printing techniques as well as in the organisation and financing of the periodical press. By the 1880s and with the advent of the halftone process, it became possible to print photographs alongside text. Although it was expensive and time consuming even some newspapers began to publish photographs. However, the domain of visual information remained magazines. Recent research suggests that these were central agents in the visualisation of media communications in the nineteenth century (Carvalho 2017; Bucher 2016b). In most parts of the globe magazines existed with an extremely versatile publishing industry.¹ The market for images was – indeed – already global with picture agencies offering images transnationally, co-operations of publishing houses and many free-lance photographers (amateur and professional), illustrators, designers, etc. catering for the needs of editors.² There were general interest magazines such as *L'Illustration* in France, *Harpers Weekly* in the USA, *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* in Germany, *London Illustrated News* in Britain – to name just a few, but well known examples. Special interest magazines flourished as well targeting customers according to themes in combination with categories such as age, gender, social standing, political or religious beliefs. What became to be designated as “sports” was one of the themes which became quite early a topic of special interest magazines (Carvalho 2017).

¹ There is still lack of research on the general development of photojournalism and visualisation practices in the periodical press (Tribukait 2017).

² The development and extent of this market are still strongly under-researched apart from Malte Zierenberg's recent work (Zierenberg 2013). The picture market before 1900 is almost a *terra incognita* (Lachenicht 2006, 66; Bucher 2016, 44).

The intimate entanglement between media and sports is considered to be fundamental for the development of modern spectator sports (Becker and Schäfer 2014; Martschukat and Stieglitz 2016). Sport magazines were at the forefront to construct not only an “image” of modern sports, they had a defining power of what to consider as “sport” in general and advocated values which had an impact on society as a whole. In short: they fuelled and structured the discourses on sports and what was connected to or should be associated with it. Although they did not concentrate entirely on spectator sports, illustrated sports magazines increased the audience and provided further information on people, techniques, circumstances, rules, history and future events, and developments (Carvalho 2017, 161). Visual communication was a central element of this process (O’Mahony 2017, 510; Walther 2007). Especially photography transmitted notions of bodies, gender, ethnicity, and sportive activities and invited readers (or rather beholders) to model themselves according to the presented examples. They could equally consider themselves as eyewitnesses to events labelled as “sport” on a local, national, and – from time to time – transnational scale. Activities which focused on bodily practices and competition within a scheduled framework of rules and distinct spaces were congenial to be visualised.

When Pierre Antoine Baptiste René Lafitte (1872-1938) launched a new magazine, “La Vie au Grand Air,” in April 1898 he was sure to fill a gap in the French press. At the end of the 1890s there was no general magazine on sports in France but several periodical publications on cycling and other sports. Lafitte himself had worked as a sports journalist at “Véloce-Sport” a magazine devoted to cycling published in his native town Bordeaux before he went to Paris in the early 1890s (Gervais 2007, 406). He was well aware of the recent developments in the publishing industry – not only in France but also in the USA, Britain, and Germany and assumed that a modern, richly illustrated, and well-designed magazine could be a success in France. Another development contributed to the success of sports magazines: interest in movement of human and animal bodies opened up a field of research to scientists as it fuelled the imagination of the public. In France, Jules-Etienne Marey had published his seminal work “Le mouvement” in 1894 summarizing his researches on movement, which extensively drew on photographic techniques of recording. Furthermore, cinema began to be widely appreciated by the public since 1895 when the Lumière brothers began to show short films. The first show consisted of ten films (approx. 35 seconds each) of which three featured more or less sportive outdoor activities (a man attempting somersaults, horse-riding, sea-bathing). Ever since sport and film were intimately connected (Stieglitz 2017). A third element might be considered, even though it seems only loosely connected to the visualization of sports in LVGA: the naked body featured very

early in photography and Paris³ was notorious as a hub for erotic and pornographic image production. To sum up: bodies in motion in general, youthful bodies in particular and those barely dressed or naked were important themes of photographically produced imagery around 1900. All those tendencies were intertwined in the visual program of LVGA.

The program of LVGA was sketched in the first issue: Lafitte wished to cover all activities “keeping muscles and brain awake” (Lafitte 1898, 4), including sports proper (in the modern sense), but also photography, pigeon racing, tourism, ballooning, and sports fashion. This program went beyond any concept of earlier sports magazines in France and even challenged general interest magazines such as *L’Illustration* or the illustrated supplements of the large daily newspapers, which also covered sport or outdoor events (Gervais 2007, 405-71). He addressed what he called the whole youth of France and claimed that France was already a “country of muscles” just as Britain seemed to him to be, and therefore in need of a magazine just like those published in the USA and Britain. He mentioned his plans for the illustrations and assured the readers that they should be vibrant, lively, entertaining, and instructive (Lafitte 1898, 4).⁴ This was not very original and echoed long held beliefs about the function and benefits of illustrations in the press. In general illustrations were conceived as reliable, authentic, entertaining, instructing, interesting, pleasing, and emotional pieces of information. They should appeal to mind and heart and of course, although rarely if at all mentioned in editorials, stimulate potential customers to open their purses. In an attempt to do some market research Lafitte invited his readers to tell LVGA which sports they wanted to be covered. About 2,500 subscribers answered and in No. 3 the results were published. Most frequently cycling was mentioned followed by horseracing, fencing, motoring, hunting, football, rowing, gymnastics, and athletics (LVGA 1898, May 1, 31). This seemed to corroborate Lafitte’s concept which was adjusted according to contemporary trends. Especially aviation and motor sports were extensively covered when both arose. In 1898, the annual subscription cost eight francs for Parisians and nine francs for all others. The price rose constantly and reached 24 francs (same price for Paris and the rest of France) in 1908. A single issue cost 50 centimes in 1908, which was too expensive for moderate wage earners. The target audience was relatively well-off and presumably middle-class or higher. LVGA was a success and was probably the most popular sports magazine in France (Gervais 2007) before the Great War (it ceased publication in 1922).

The magazine had two features which distinguished it from other contemporary magazines. The first, already noted, was the general interest in all activi-

³ Although such images were produced in many places, the indication “from Paris” was in many cases just a symbolic attribution (Frizot 1997).

⁴ In the second issue readers were invited to send in photographs (LVGA 1898, April 15, 23).

ties of leisure with an aspect of bodily exercise. The second was design and layout. Thierry Gervais notes that about 70% of the magazine's surface was illustrations, most of them by means of photography. It was the images which structured the magazine and steered readers (or rather beholders) through the pages. The visual narrative was all important and the editor relied on the notion of photographic authenticity and experimented with montage, layout, image-text combinations which at times reflected cinematic narration:

The magazine changes the rhythm of reading the journal, from the first to the last page, to the benefit of a random consultation. The modern reader of the Belle Époque no longer reads an illustrated journal, he browses through a magazine.⁵

The design of the front page was an important issue for the editors. From the very first number it was always a large image, in most cases based on a photograph, illustrating an important topic of the issue. It became even more important when subscription did not suffice to reach the targeted audience and the growing need to sale at newsstands urged editors to enhance the visibility of their product. The cover was supposed to appeal to potential readers and represented the concept. The editor of LVGA applied the whole array of instruments of contemporary magazine design to keep it attractive, interesting, eye-catching, and up to date.

3. Images in Magazines

The cover published in April 1908 [Figure 1] is (quite obviously) an image-text combination and needs analytical instruments taking the interplay of both into account. Furthermore, the immediate context and the wider historical background need to be considered as already sketched in the previous paragraphs.

These analytical steps are basic requirements, which are a matter of course in recent historical research, but were rather unusual up to the 1960s and 1970s. Only after the so-called pictorial or visual turn in cultural studies, images came to be regarded as proper sources. Although even so-called "mainstream" historians in the twentieth century never completely dismissed visual evidence, pictures were mainly used to illustrate arguments or to add a specific dimension. Images were rarely the starting point of an investigation, and they seldom played more than a supporting role.

⁵ Translated from French by the author: "Le magazine renouvelle les rythmes de lecture du journal, de la première à la dernière page, au profit d'une consultation aléatoire. Le lecteur moderne de la Belle Époque ne lit plus un journal illustré, il feuillette un magazine" (Gervais 2007). The German counterpart of LVGA, *Sport im Bild* established in 1895 had fewer images and a more "conservative" layout. *Sport im Bild* was edited by two English journalists: Andrew Pitcairn-Knowles and Horace F. Simon and was published in Berlin and Vienna.

To cut a long story short, it was not until after the subjective and creative potential of photography was acknowledged in the 1970s and the approaches of historians towards visual evidence had undergone a re-evaluation that using photographs as a source became a possibility within historiography (Wells 2015; Jäger 2009). Not only influences from within the discipline, but the critical reception of methods and theories from sociology, anthropology, economics, literature and film-studies, philosophy, and art history supported the reorientation of historiography. Visual sources became more important and were acknowledged as subjective interpretations of reality and no longer as plain records. Since the last decades of the twentieth century, research has shifted attention from a picture's content to its context and use. The "raw" documentary value of a photograph (in other words, the picture and its subject matter) is less taken into account now as a reliable source in studies of history.

Of the many "mainstream" historians who have used images, it is perhaps the work of Peter Burke which is a case in point. In his book *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Peter Burke argues that images have the same historical value as texts and oral testimony, for they record acts of eyewitnessing (Burke 2001, 14). His attention is on pictures – especially prints, photographs, and so forth – that are contemporary with the events they describe. However, the notion of eyewitnessing echoes contemporary ideas of what photographs represent but it is crucial that the images are not necessarily eyewitnesses of the event to which they were connected. They were rather interpretations of what was to be considered an event in the first place.⁶ Furthermore, images not only relate to the objects they represent but to other images, either those that depict the same or similar objects or those that circulate at any given time. There are conventions which guide image making and image interpreting. It is these conventions which reduce the polysemy of images in a specific communicative process. Since most images – especially images in mass media – have been instruments of (mass) communication most images follow these conventions. If an image contradicts expectations of potential beholders, in most cases captions and texts guide the interpretations. The fist on the cover of LVGA No. 503 is a case in point: not only is it connected to sports and especially boxing it is also attributed to Willie Lewis and a specific occasion. Interested beholders could read that at the bottom of the page. Without this context it becomes a picture open to any kind of meaning. But it is still a photographic image of a fist, what Roland Barthes called a "message without code," the plain photographic record (Barthes 1964, 46).⁷

⁶ According to Bösch (2010) historical events may be defined as the turning points within a historical narrative, which themselves carry consequences. The historical event is viewed as the expression of specific contemporary expectation and thus an anticipation of the future; occurrences thus only qualify as events in retrospect.

⁷ There has been an extensive debate on Barthes's contention which cannot be unfolded here.

What is often lost in the interpretive process is the history and analysis of the images themselves. Instead, they are taken either at face value in order to provide eyewitness accounts of the past,⁸ or as entirely dependent on accompanying text and context, or their meaning is guided by the researcher's theoretical approach. The intrinsic history of documentary and sports photography, with its own rules, would thus be more or less excluded from consideration as the content of the image as well. In short: newer approaches concentrate on the subjective aspects of photography, sometimes overemphasize the polysemic character of the image, and consider less the image itself, the subject-matter, aesthetics, and applied techniques as providers of meaning. In Cultural History the context eclipses the image, which is sometimes not considered in its own right. Even though the use of visual material becomes more and more common it is rarely analysed with the same elaboration as texts. However, the full potential of images can only be exploited when both aspects are treated equally and the relation of images and accompanying text are taken into account. Thus, as in the example discussed here, the very importance the editors of LVGA attached to the photographs and their montage has to be reflected in the historical approach towards them.

To illustrate this, we concentrate for the moment on the image chosen here as an example. The following analytical steps have to be taken: Identifying the technique, identifying the subject (already done in the paragraphs above), recognizing possible iconographic connections, establishing the immediate context, and analysing the relation to the text. The first question seems easy to answer: it is a printed (part of a) photograph. It is less obvious to determine which printing technique was applied. The halftone process in use since the 1880s would be an option but then a delicate pattern of dots would be discernible when the image is enlarged. This doesn't seem to be the case.⁹ So another technique is probable, in this case photogravure (Gervais 2007a, 419-20), mentioned by Lafitte in the first issue of LVGA (Lafitte 1898, 4), which is a more complicated process and costlier but allows higher quality. It underlines that the images played a pivotal role in LVGA and invited the readers/beholders to take a close look.

The photograph of the fist then was not intended as a simple representation but incorporates further meanings. In other words: it can and should also be read as a sign. In cultural analysis it is common to differentiate between indexi-

⁸ Susan Crane (2008, 310) argues: "In some quite ordinary and useful ways, we still assume that photographs [and film, we might add – JJ] are the most accessible, unmediated forms of representation."

⁹ This is not conclusive because the original could not be scrutinized. The high definition scan made for gallica.fr (LVGA 1908, May 9, cover <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k96036661.item>>) seems to indicate that it is a photogravure.

cal, iconic, and symbolic signs.¹⁰ As an indexical sign, the image of the fist means: “This is a fist,” and a very specific and unique fist as well which existed the moment the photograph was taken. As an iconic sign it is a signifier resembling the signified – in other words: this is what a fist looks like, no matter whose fist it is. As a symbol it can mean a lot of things according to the context: strength, power, masculinity, determination, readiness to fight, etc. The raised fist can also be a political sign connected with the Left – which will be discussed a little later. However, none of the three interpretations alone is conclusive. They obviously work together and the contemporary beholders were invited to see all three messages together. To narrow the interpretation down the direct context has to be taken into account, which is the magazine and the cover. The header of the page gives the title of the magazine, date of publication, and its price. The two blocks of text to the left and right read as follows: “Dans ce Numéro: Le Match Willie Lewis - Walter Stanton” and “Ce numéro contient un *hors-texte*: TOMMY BURNS Champion du monde de Boxe.” At the bottom further information is given: “Le Match Willie Lewis - Walter Stanton¹¹ / Le poing du Willie Lewis, vainqueur du grand combat de boxe de samedi dernier (Voir l’article page 296 et 297).” And at the bottom right some more information on the publisher is given.

From the texts, readers learn that it is indeed Willie Lewis’s fist and that he had won the match against Walter Stanton on May 2, 1908, which took place at the Cirque de Paris in Paris. The article within the magazine recounts the fight and reports that Lewis and Stanton afterwards came to the editorial office of the magazine to be photographed. There they staged moments of their fight and posed for the photographer (Mortane 1908, 296-7) [Fig. 2]. The author, Jacques Mortane (1883-1939),¹² notes:

Fortunately Willie Lewis, whose favourite magazine is *La Vie au Grand Air*, has agreed to stage for our readers the diverse phases of the fight. These photographs, of absolute exactitude, show to our public what an all too eager and troublesome official denied to us [on the spot]. Thanks to Willie Lewis’s sporting spirit we overcame the difficulties and secured these unprecedented and, in a way, historic documents. (ibid.)¹³

¹⁰ For a discussion of the implications of semiotic theory see Liz Wells’s work (Wells 2015). Very short but instructive in this respect are Brocks (2012, 14-6) and Müller (2003, 158-65).

¹¹ Willie Lewis (1884-1949, active 1901-1915) and Walter Stanton (1885-1944, active 1903-1912) were both successful US-American boxers. Tommy Burns (1881-1955) was a Canadian boxer and World Champion between 1906 and 1908.

¹² Mortane was a pseudonym. His real name was Joseph Jacques Philippe Romanet. Before he turned to journalism he was a history teacher and started working with LVGA in 1908.

¹³ Translated from French by the author: “Heureusement, Willie Lewis, dont le journal préféré est la *Vie au Grand Air*, a bien voulu poser pour nos lecteurs les diverses phases du combat. Ces photographies, d’une exactitude absolue, montreront au public que si un officiel trop zélé et maladroit a voulu nous mettre des bâtons dans les roues, grâce à l’esprit sportif de Willie Lewis nous pouvons tourner les difficultés et conserver des documents inédits et, en

Figure 2: LVGA (1908), No. 503, May 9, 296-7



Source: <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k96036661/f12.item>>.

He indicates that LVGA would have liked to have a photographer on the spot but was not allowed to take pictures with flashlight during the fight. Mortane assures that the images re-enact exactly the crucial moments of the match and stresses that Lewis admires LVGA – two details to guarantee the credibility of his own narrative in words and images. It was probably during this session that the picture of Lewis's fist was taken. As in most cases, the photographer remains anonymous.

Although boxing was already mentioned as a topic in the first issue of LVGA it rarely made a front page. And if so, usually a boxer or two boxers in sportswear were represented as full or half figures. Up to 1907 there had been ten covers (or 2.5% of a total of 404 cover images). Coverage of boxing rose in the following years (34 or approximately 10% of 344 front pages) with a peak in the years 1909-1911 (20 front pages).¹⁴ 1908 was a pivotal year in this respect; for the first time more than two issues had a boxing title (a total of four among which the fist of Willie Lewis). This clearly indicates that boxing became a more popular topic in the second part of the first decade of the twentieth century. Since boxing was an exclusively male spectator sport and it was

quelque sorte, historiques." It is curious that Mortane does not mention Stanton who obviously agreed as well to stage the fight.

¹⁴ According to my own analysis of the 748 issues available published between April 1898 and August 1914.

arguably the sport which exposed most of male bodies, this indicates a growing interest in questions pertaining to masculinity.

The image “reveals” the winner’s fist which was hidden by a boxing glove during the fight. The photograph on the cover then is both, evidence and symbol: It is a representation of Lewis’s fist and as such of the most prominent part of the body in boxing. It is a symbol for Lewis’s strength, for boxing, and the values that went with it at the time (thus giving every beholder the opportunity to “read” the image in this respect according to their preferences).

One pitfall of analysis would be to connect the main symbolic meaning to the iconographic tradition of bare and raised fists in political discourses: The raised fist as a political symbol of the Left, which art historian Lutz Heusinger has unfolded (Heusinger 2011). The difference is that as a symbol of the Left, a fist would be represented raised straight upwards and probably with the fingers visible. Although it is not to say that this political dimension is not in the image, but it is a rather secondary layer of meaning, which has – arguably – no impact within the context in which this image was produced and used.¹⁵

In our case the raised fist in boxing highlights punching above the belt and indicates a fair fight. In itself, it has not much to do with the boxing match to which it is connected by the accompanying text. It could be a stock image, taken years before the match and – indeed – does not even need to be Lewis’s fist at all. However, as Mortane writes, LVGA is Lewis’s favourite magazine, the latter was on the spot, and photographs had been taken during his visit to LVGA. It is exactly this technique of cross-referencing which corroborates to readers and beholders that the image depicts what LVGA claims. The image itself is not sufficient to support the claim.

The photograph clearly indicates a major sport event (cover), promotes boxing, the ethics of fair fighting, and the masculine body. It invites readers to reenact the fight in their imagination (article within the magazine). With the photographic evidence at hand it is suggested that the narrative in LVGA is correct. Text and images corroborate each other; at least in contemporary theory. The magazine itself presents itself as very close to all sport events as a passionate and friendly, but neutral observer recognized by the sportsmen. It promotes sport or rather leisure activities centering on bodily practices as pivotal in modern society.

¹⁵ From the vantage point of political iconography LVGA’s visual language would be analysed differently, stressing the ideological subtexts in sports journalism and issues of class, which clearly exist but are not the focus of this article.

4. Conclusion

I used this example to sketch some steps necessary to analyse photographs in the context of a magazine published in the early twentieth century. LVGA was one of the leading magazines of its time. It offered visual narratives of what modern sport should be. This included a specific gaze on the male and female body, on the settings of sport events, and highlighted the relationship between spectators – on the spot and vicarious crowds – and sportspersons. The visual language of the magazine was very modern in terms of photographic aesthetics, magazine layout, and at times subject matter. Sometimes the way a specific subject was addressed broke new ground, as was the case with the fist on the cover. LVGA addressed explicitly the entire “young” public of France. Specialized daily sports magazines, so it claimed, had already grouped a young elite around them, which seemed to be the “hope of the future” (LVGA 1898, April 1, 4). LVGA in turn wished to target the whole of young French men and women, though it was too expensive for most of these potential readers. When browsing through the pages (and especially the images) of the magazine it becomes clear that “youth” was not only defined by age and unwittingly by economic power but quite as much by outdoor activity itself. To the editor and the subscribers sports per se, it might be argued, promised or indicated “youth,” “progress,” and “future” independent of age, gender, and class.

The visualizations of sports, outdoor activity, youth, gender, and class provide a concretisation of what these meant to contemporary beholders. The images form an own narrative of the topics reported, which merits attention. Although photographs were seen as documents and evidence they also rely on aesthetic patterns, iconographic traditions, and embody imaginary notions. As argued here, iconic, indexical, and symbolic meanings are interrelated. In connection with the immediate context (here: LVGA) and the wider context (magazines and the growing importance of media and international trade in news) historical analysis can discern different layers of meaning. The first is the raw subject matter; the second is what can be called the “conventional” meaning, which provides insights into the contemporary significance of an image in a specific context. Other layers relate to contemporary specialized discourses, e.g. in the case unfolded here the meaning of the fist in the boxing community, or according to the questions asked in historical analysis, e.g. the construction of gender or youth around 1900.

Understanding the content of an image, its immediate and wider context including iconographic traditions and conventions and how they work together in establishing what can be called the “conventional meaning” (Jäger 2017) of an image at the time it circulated allows a new perspective on visual communication. It is important to note, though, that the “conventional” meaning of a photograph is not the only one, albeit the one to start from for any further analyses.

This will highlight the opportunities for historical approaches towards sports history in using visual evidence and opens the perspective to recent debates in historiography regarding visual sources.

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.43.2018.2.220-250](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.43.2018.2.220-250)